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ABSTRACT

This Australian study examined the attitudes of preservice early childhood teachers toward their male colleagues working in child care centers or preschool kindergartens. The study also investigated differences in perspectives between new students and graduating students, and whether students enrolled in child care courses held views different from those of students enrolled in preschool courses. Subjects were 100 female students from each of the diploma courses in child care and preschool teaching at a tertiary institution, surveyed on their first day of their 3-year course, and an additional 100 female students surveyed on the last day of their course. Students completed a questionnaire in which they described how they thought three fictional early childhood workers (one male, one female, and one androgynous worker called "Chris," a male in whom male and female sex role behaviors were equally balanced) would respond to four typical classroom experiences. Students also responded to specific questions relating to their perceptions of the vocational aspirations of these three characters. Results indicated that over half of the students in both groups perceived that males and females would respond differently to the classroom situations. The majority of students also perceived males as working for shorter periods of time in the early childhood field. (MM)

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TERTIARY STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS OF MALE WORKERS IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD FIELD IN AUSTRALIA

Paper presented at AERA Conference, Atlanta,
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ABSTRACT

The early childhood field in Australia has been slow to accept that for a number of reasons males are perceived to have a role in children's services, even with the very youngest children in child care. This is in spite of a general 'freeing up' of attitudes relating to appropriate male and female roles in the wider community. This is a direct contradiction to a basic early childhood tenet, namely, that young children should be helped to recognise stereotypes and caricatures of people in their everyday world, and in vicarious situations including books, toys and television.

This study was an attempt to determine how receptive early childhood students enrolled in a three-year university course are to 'male stereotyping' when perceiving their male colleagues working in child care centres and preschool kindergartens; to determine whether new students and exiting students had different perspectives to males, and whether students enrolled in child care courses held different views from their colleagues who were enrolled in preschool courses.

Over one hundred new students and a similar number of exiting students were asked to volunteer to complete a questionnaire which described four typical early childhood settings involving interactions between an adult and a child. They were asked to describe the way in which three mythical student colleagues, 'Mary,' 'Steve' and the androgynous 'Chris' would respond. In addition, they were asked specific questions relating to their perceptions of the vocational aspirations of 'Mary', 'Steve' and 'Chris'. The material for the questionnaire was adapted from earlier work by Seifert (1974).

Results indicated that over one half of the students in both cohorts perceived that males and females would respond differently in the chosen situations and supported Seifert's earlier work relating to the length of time males and females would work with children, move within the early childhood field, and seek advancement in the early childhood field.

The results indicate that students, whether they are at the beginning or end of their three-year tertiary course, and irrespective of the early childhood course they are undertaking, perceive males and females as operating differently in identical roles. There are implications in these findings for tertiary teachers; it would appear that tertiary staff need to ensure that there are ample opportunities for students to reflect on these attitudes during their tertiary courses and to be exposed to both exemplary male and female teachers and caregivers in the field during their initial training. It may mean that male students in training would benefit from extra support in ways of handling overt discrimination and outright bias from colleagues in the field, parents and children.

INTRODUCTION

The early childhood field in Australia has always been regarded as something of a paradox by the community, its users and those who work in the field; what other group would expect high quality services from philanthropically-minded, underpaid employees; what other group would debate whether or not 'care' was a service for parents of children when it is clearly a response to community need; what other group would earnestly but inappropriately debate whether education was care or care was education; what other group would trumpet the need for young children to develop into divergent, creative thinkers and doers while at the same time maintain its own rigid traditional thoughts about early childhood being a 'woman's' place?

At a time when the community in general is becoming less resistant to diversity in terms of encouraging people from a variety of different social, economic or ethnic/cultural groups and those with physical or intellectual disabilities to operate a wide range of activities, it is difficult to appreciate the continuing opposition to male early childhood workers.

Hopson (1990) has suggested that it is possible - and necessary - to assist young children to develop those skills which are necessary for them to challenge unfair behaviour. She suggests:

> "Teach children to recognise stereotypes and caricatures of people. Young people can become quick to spot 'unfair' images if they are helped to think critically about what they see in books, on television, in the form of toys and so on." (Hopson, 1990:11)

It follows then, that although the early childhood field has developed a reasonable strategy for assisting young children to develop critical thinking skills, the field itself is unable, or unwilling, to face the fact that it is biased against male practitioners and as such can be adjudged guilty of unfair behaviour.

This concept of males in early childhood settings and the lack of male workers in Australia seems to point up a further area of traditional conservatism in early childhood services. While there is a disconcerting lack of interest or positive speculation on this position in Australia, it would be true to say that in other countries, including the United States and England, there has been an increasing interest in, and awareness of, the need for a more equitable balance between males and females in early childhood settings, just as males have been encouraged to join other previously female-dominated professions including social work and nursing.

Over a long period of time, parents, teachers and psychologists have made frequent and intense demands for more male teachers at the early childhood level, that is in the areas of child care, preschool, kindergarten and the first few grades of the primary school (Gold and Reis, 1978). In fact, Bailey (1983) has suggested that male

involvement in early childhood programs is not a product of contemporary thinking and values. He asserts that Frederick Froebel, the father of the kindergarten movement, had all-male staff for his original kindergarten in 1837 and that women were only admitted to the fold after Froebel's own marriage! While we can speculate about the reasons for Froebel's change of attitude, the fact remains that for the last century or so, early childhood education has been perceive as primarily the domain of women. This assertion was reinforced by instructions and directions which were issued at various times. It is not so long ago that males were prohibited in the USA from teaching at the early school grades. This quote sums up the position in 1947:

> "Men should not be asked to play nursemaid to young children ... it should be made the policy of the school system to place men only in the upper grades in their chosen subject fields so that such work will come to be characterised as the work for men. Women should appear as out of place in such assignments as men are now in the lower elementary grades." (Kaplan, in Robinson, 1981:29).

The thinking that men did not belong in the early childhood field prevailed in the 1950s and is epitomised in the following quote:

> "One could hardly imagine a situation in which a man would be in his element teaching a class of kindergarteners. He would immediately become suspect." (Robinson, 1981:27).

This curious debate apparently assumed a different direction in America in the 1960s and 1970s, in that a reason was sought for permitting men to work with young children because of the positive contribution males could make to the profession. As a result, two schools of argument have emerged to support the inclusion of males in the early childhood field. One, known as the traditionalists, wants to reinforce traditional sex-role norms, the other labelled not surprisingly as the nontraditionalists, base their argument on the need to loosen and change the traditional sex-role norms.

The traditionalists, who predominated in the 1960s and early 1970s, expressed a concern that the female-dominated early childhood years would result in 'feminised' boys. Numerous assertions have been made relating to the male's positive role in the early childhood developmental process. These include preventing children from perceiving school as a female-dominated institution, improving school performance and classroom atmosphere for boys, acting as a counter-balance for 'urbanisation' and 'family disintegration problems', providing masculine role models for boys, preventing juvenile delinquency and finally, changing the image of the early childhood profession itself. Despite the lack of empirical evidence to support this traditional approach, no less than twenty-one articles appeared in North American journals in the period between 1954 and 1977 in support of this view. These purported to describe experiments which 'proved' the value of males in early

childhood classrooms (Robinson, 1981).

However, research which has been undertaken to support these assertions does not shed any real light on the topic, mainly because the subjects have been too few, the variables too many and most research lacked a clear theoretical basis of child behaviour and gender identification and development (Gold et al, 1977).

This inconclusive debate may have continued for some time had it not been for significant advances in research on sex roles and androgyny, "a state in which both sexes feel free to choose from a full range of human behaviours. Neither sex needs to feel restricted to the behaviour ascribed by socialisation" (Dean, 1982:248). The data from these studies provided the nontraditionalists with what they regarded as compelling evidence for their argument that men should work in early childhood. Androgyny offered children of both sexes a model of a caring, nurturant male; "males offer children more than their 'masculine presence'; rather they should be encouraged to take jobs in early childhood because of the androgynous balance they can provide young children" (Robinson, 1981:28). The nontraditionalists claimed to base their view on empirical research on androgyny, mainly the work by Bem and his associates. This research argued that the traditional sex-role behaviours for both men and women seriously restricts their behaviour, particularly in the case of men, that rigid sex-role differentiation has outlived its usefulness and that the androgynous person achieves greater psychological health than their sex-typed colleagues because they can engage in whatever behaviour seems most appropriate regardless of stereotyped sex roles. This argument was translated into the realms of early childhood by suggesting that either a man or a woman could "Prepare snacks for children, soothe a grazed knee, play ball with children or oversee activities at the woodwork bench" (Robinson, 1981:29).

The late 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a mellowing of the two extreme positions and a recognition that the social equity hypothesis, which espouses the cause of males and females in all jobs, is good for early childhood. This policy has the potential to increase career options for men (and women) and assist in the steady education of society to extinguish the link between early childhood education and 'women's work'. However, on a more practical note, the proponents of the social equity hypothesis have to contend with the 'closed shop' approach of many female early childhood workers who express the concern that an influx of male workers into the early childhood industry could threaten women's jobs in the area. The wheel appears to have turned full circle.

Notwithstanding this, men and women will behave differently with young children. Men, by their own preferences, may choose more messy experiences, more 'rough housing', more activities with trucks, more physical interactions than do many women, but they would still be fulfilling their role of providing a variety of ways of meeting the young child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs (Robinson

et al. 1980). This androgynous balance should permit all early childhood educators to perform their role more comfortably and possibly more competently. It follows then, that although we cannot put every young boy in a male teacher's or caregiver's learning environment, we should be encouraging involvement of male teachers and caregivers in early childhood education, until a more equitable balance prevails.

First we in Australia need to examine the reasons why men would want to work with young children in a predominantly caring situation in which the majority of their working colleagues would be women. Seifert (1974) has suggested that other staff may perceive the male as entering the early childhood profession for the 'wrong' reasons, such as promotion and idealism. This is not difficult to believe as evidence from the field of nursing supports this view. In recent times male nurses have run the gauntlet of suspicious and threatened people in a predominantly female occupation. The problem however is deeper than mere superficial assertion because such attitudes could interfere with the potential effectiveness of both male and female early childhood workers.

ATTITUDES OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD FIELD TO MALE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKERS

While there is some research evidence to support the notion that female early childhood workers are at least unhappy about the entrance of males into the early childhood field, and perceive them as 'different', anecdotal evidence is inconclusive as well. A survey by Seifert and Lyons (1976) of Canadian Elementary School principals (male) found evidence that school principals believed that a male early childhood worker would have to be someone who was exceptional - just to be there:

> "A man in early childhood would have to be creative, full of life; possess principles and strong values and not care what others thought of him. He'd have to be very sure of himself." (Seifert and Lane, 1976:10).

Australian research on the ethical concerns of early childhood workers (Clyde and Rodd, 1989) contained a section on ethical concerns related to working with males. Over ninety percent of the one hundred and seven responses indicated that males should be encouraged to work in the early childhood field; males were seen as making a special contribution to the early childhood area because they provided a role model for children of female sole parents (21.6%). While this may be seen as a positive step by the field it is disappointing in that the reasons expressed reiterated the strong traditionalist tendencies of the 1970s. Other respondents (14.4%) suggested that males have a different outlook on life compared with females, while male strength, character and personality act as a balance and challenge to the female stereotyping of the nurturing role and caregiving role in early childhood services (2.8%). In response to a question related to whether or not early childhood workers

would find the issue of "sharing the nurturing role with male early childhood workers of some concern, or little or no concern"; nearly seven percent (of one hundred and seven respondents) reported the issue would be of some concern, whereas over seventy percent reported little or no concern with this item as an ethical issue and that males should be encouraged to work in the early childhood field (90.8% of respondents). It would seem that contemporary kindergarten and child care workers in the state of Victoria do not perceive males as less than satisfactory colleagues. It is interesting to note that only 57.1% of the respondents had worked with males at some stage, and listed the following explanations for the limited number of male workers in the early childhood years: lack of public acceptance (15.2%); lack of pay and promotional opportunities (8.8%), the stigma of male involvement in child abuse (7.2%) and conflict over the 'naturalness' of males performing basic care tasks (7.2%).

This response is very different from that report by Seifert (1974). In his study he issued female early childhood workers with identical descriptions of roles, qualifications and abilities of two mythical kindergarten teachers, George and Linda Smith. They were asked to comment on the qualities needed for success, problems to be encountered and reasons for choosing to work in the area of early childhood. Results indicated that respondents felt that George and Linda had different reasons for entering the early childhood field, they would encounter different problems and required different conditions for success in the field. While these responses are predictable, one response was not: that George would need less of a friendly rapport with his colleagues than Linda would; perhaps the respondents were offering the message that they would provide less support for George than they would for Linda?

Masterson's (1992) report of an early survey he had undertaken makes interesting reading; results from the two hundred and twenty-two centres in Ohio which responded to his survey indicated that directors believed women "have a natural ability to nurture children and that men failed to have this instinct" (Masterson, 1992: 31) and would hire an untrained woman but not an untrained man.

Masterson summed up the current position succinctly:

> "Whether or not female directors are aware of the negative bias against male early childhood teachers, the survey results suggest they may in fact hold such attitudes. This could be one of the biggest factors why men find it hard to enter our profession". (Masterson, 1992:32).

However, while these data point up the presence of bias they do not answer the question relating to the time at which such bias forms in the attitudes of early childhood workers; do they enter preservice training with a bias against male colleagues, does it develop during training, or as a result of working in the early childhood field itself?

THE STUDY

In an attempt to determine the attitude of preservice early childhood students to working with male colleagues, the author surveyed one hundred female students from each of the diploma courses in child care and preschool teaching from a Victorian tertiary institution on their first day of their tertiary course and a further one hundred female students on the last day of their three year course. The students were asked to suggest the way in which three mythical early childhood workers, 'Mary', 'Steve' and the androgynous 'Chris', would respond to four typical experiences - the worker sees a child crying; some children are building an obstacle course or are busy in the digging patch; a child obviously needs a quiet time on someone's lap; Pamela is having trouble at the woodwork bench (refer to the Appendix for details of the survey questions). The responses were similar for both the first and third year groups of students while the responses from child care and preschool students were identical.

About half the first and third year students indicated that they believed that 'Mary', 'Steve' and 'Chris' would react to each situation in the same way, but the remaining fifty percent of the respondents suggested that Mary would place the child on her lap whereas Steve would sit "next to the child", while 'Chris' would ask the child to "join the rest of the children and learn together", or "do what Mary would do; perhaps because he's a male he might ask aloud what the child was crying for first because women tend to touch more quickly than men", or ask another child to comfort a crying child. There were many similar examples of the androgynous Chris seeking the support of other children to meet their peers' needs, whereas Steve would assist, direct and tell children at the woodwork bench and digging areas and Mary would use language to explain or describe.

Clearly the first and final year early childhood students had well conceived ideas of the way in which male and female early childhood workers will react to identical situations.

In addition, all students were asked to select from a list of prepared examples the reasons why 'Mary', 'Steve' and 'Chris' would want to be an early childhood worker and the length of time they could be expected to remain in the field. This was an adaptation of Seifert's (1975) study. While the majority of students suggested that all three workers would have the same main reason for choosing to be an early childhood worker, usually a desire to work with young children, there was a significant difference in their perceptions of the amount of time males and females would spend in the field; females would spend "more than five years" (the final box), whereas males would spend between one and two years or two and five years in the early childhood field. Clearly these students perceived males as transient workers in the early childhood field. This kind of response reinforces the work of Seifert (1974) in his American study and highlights the potential anomalies in the early childhood

field; men are welcome to work in the field, colleagues like working with them for traditional, rather than contemporary reasons, they expect males to behave differently from females in their handling of day to day situations in the centre and they are sure that males do not see early childhood as a long-term career, as is the case with females.

CONCLUSION

Early childhood is a profession which prides itself on demonstrating a high level of interpersonal skills and establishing a caring, supportive environment for all the participants. If this is the case, it may be possible for males and females to accept the commitment and capacities of their colleagues of both sexes to providing a supportive, nurturing environment for the young child. Hopefully this androgynous concept of the work of both female and male workers will become the dominant characteristic of the good early childhood worker of the next century.

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APPENDIX

Some Thoughts for New Students .....

You are just beginning your pre-service course at the School of Early Childhood Studies, University of Melbourne. You are understandably excited and probably somewhat apprehensive about your role as an early childhood worker. This survey is meant to ascertain the way you think some mythical colleagues of yours might react to typical experiences in an early childhood setting.

Your mythical colleagues are named Mary, Steve and Chris. Now read on:

1. The caregiver is working with children in the outdoor area and notices a child crying:

1.1 What would Mary do? Why?

.....

.....

.....

1.2 What would Steve do? Why?

.....

.....

.....

1.3 What would Chris do? Why?

.....

.....

.....

2. Some of the children are engaged in building an obstacle course and a few are busy in the digging patch

2.1 What would Mary do? Why?

.....

.....

.....

2.2 What would Steve do? Why?

.....

.....

.....

2.3 What would Chris do? Why?

.....

.....
.....

3. A child is resting quietly in the book corner but obviously would benefit from sitting on an adult's lap looking at a book:

3.1 What would Mary do? Why?

.....
.....
.....

3.2 What would Steve do? Why?

.....
.....
.....

3.3 What would Chris do? Why?

.....
.....
.....

4. John and Pamela are working independently at the carpentry bench. Pamela seems to need some assistance with holding the nails, but John is managing well.

4.1 What would Mary do? Why?

.....
.....
.....

4.2 What would Steve do? Why?

.....
.....
.....

4.3 What would Chris do? Why?

.....
.....
.....

5. The parents are bringing the children into the centre at the beginning of the

session and expect to be greeted by the caregiver:

5.1 How would Mary handle this situation? Why?

.....

.....

.....

5.2 How would Steve handle this situation? Why?

.....

.....

.....

5.3 How would Chris handle this situation? Why?

.....

.....

.....

Part B

Rank the responses to the first three questions from 1 to 7: 1 being the 'most important' and 7 being the 'least important'. Put a number in every box.

1. Which quality will Mary need most in order to be successful in working with young children?

- ☐ a desire to earn her own living?
- ☐ a love of children?
- ☐ a desire to change the centre?
- ☐ a sense of humour?
- ☐ a willingness to discuss professional problems with colleagues?
- ☐ a friendly rapport with colleagues?
- ☐ an ability to set limits for the children in the group?

2. What will be the most important problem that Mary will face in working with young children?
(rank from 1 to 4; 1 is the most important)

- ☐ a tendency to set too few limits on the children?
- ☐ a concern for earning a living?
- ☐ a lack of opportunity to discuss teaching problems with colleagues?
- ☐ a lack of support with colleagues?

3. Why do you think Mary chose to work with young children?
(rank from 1 to 5; 1 is the most important)

- ☐ a desire to work with young children?
- ☐ a secure and responsible job?
- ☐ couldn't think of anything else to do?
- ☐ wanted a job that could be easily co-ordinated with family resonsibility?
- ☐ an inability to succeed at other kinds of work?

4. How long do you think Mary will actually work in a centre?
(tick one box only)

- ☐ 0-1 year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 2-5 years
- ☐ more than 5 years

5. If Mary leaves the centre but keeps working with young children in some other way, how long do you think Mary will work at the new job?
(tick one box only)

- ☐ 0-1 year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 2-5 years
- ☐ more than 5 years

N.B. Same questions for "Steve" and "Chris".